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AUTHOR	Koehler, Gwen; Burke, Ann
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ABSTRACT

The Transition Class is an alternative model to the traditional college sequence of developmental courses. Offered as an option to prospective students before they complete the college application and financial aid procedures, the 12-week Transition Class is nongraded and free of charge. By taking the class before they fully matriculate in the college credit system, nontraditional, first-generation college students have the opportunity to learn about the expectations and demands of college in a supportive, low-risk environment. A holistic, integrated curriculum and class structure, along with the constant use of active learning methodologies, characterize the Transition Class. Academic skills, emotional and social skills, teamwork, career exploration, and goal setting are developed to cultivate success in the workplace as well as in the classroom. The curriculum consists of reading, writing, math, and "emotional literacy," and class sizes are small enough to foster collaborative learning and student involvement. In the Transition Class, students are expected to meet high demands and are responsible for their own learning, which is often strengthened by the communal learning environment. The Transition Class has proven extremely successful in improving the college academic achievement of "at-risk" students. (YKH)

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Transforming the Treadmill into a Staircase: Preparing non traditional, first-generation college attenders for success

by Gwen Koehler and Ann Burke
August, 1996

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The traditional method of preparing the underprepared at the community college has been to place students in developmental reading, English and math courses **after** they have been admitted to the college, **after** they have completed college assessment tests and **after** they have acquired financial aid. These students are usually disappointed and angry to find out that they are not ready for college, cannot take the "real" college courses they were planning on, and must use (and in some cases cannot use) their financial aid to pay tuition for courses that do not count toward their degree. Shortly after receiving this deflating news, these students are sitting in classes under the pressure of grades which will be recorded on their college transcripts with the challenge to put their disappointment aside and concentrate on building basic skills which they do not yet perceive as connected to their reason for coming to college. Another error is assuming that if only their academic deficiencies are remediated they will be prepared for the college classroom. Adequate instructional **time** is not allowed for the development of the emotional and social competencies required for successful negotiation in the college culture.

They begin by feeling put down and put back. Is it any wonder that completion rates are poor? Is it any wonder that it is difficult for them to experience their developmental classes as steps on the staircase leading to college? For many underprepared students this entry is experienced as a treadmill; their transcripts tell the story of repeated and unsuccessful attempts, exhausted financial aid and, finally, the end of trying to go to college.

Without post-secondary education and training these adults are now stuck in dead-end jobs that are barely self-supporting; they are the last to be hired and first to be fired. When unemployability rather than unemployment is cited as the nation's thorniest social problem,[1] the dire consequences of failing to prepare the underprepared, non traditional, first-generation college attender for career and vocational programs at the community college become urgently clear.

The Transition Class is an alternative model to the traditional sequence of developmental reading, English and math courses. It is offered as a **first** option to prospective students **before** they complete their application to the college, **before** they take the college assessment tests and **before** they apply for financial aid. The twelve-week Transition Class is non graded and offered at no cost to students. By taking the Transition Class **before** they fully matriculate in the college credit system, non traditional, first-generation college attenders are given the opportunity to learn about the expectations and demands of college attendance in a safe, supportive, low-risk learning environment **before** they must compete in the college classroom under the pressure of grades.

A holistic, integrated curriculum and class structure along with constant use of active learning methodologies characterize the Transition Class. An integrated curriculum which combines academic skill building with the emotional and social skills needed to succeed in the workplace as well as the college classroom is the foundation for the course. Teamwork,

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[1]Avishai,Bernard, "Companies Can't Make Up for Failing Schools," Manager's Journal, Wall Street Journal, July 29, 1996.

positive attitude development, personal reflection and self-assessment, as well as career exploration and goal-setting are key elements of the course. Students learn to anticipate and solve problems **prior to** enrollment in the college system.

One teacher provides direct instruction to a small group of students (class size is 15 to 20) making frequent use of collaborative learning strategies, active learning principles and classroom assessment techniques[2] to engage students in their learning process and build community. Students become a community of learners who daily practice the interpersonal skills which will be critical to their success in both the college classroom and workplace.

CURRICULUM AND METHODOLOGY

CURRICULUM

The curriculum of the Transition Class is based on the skills employers want as outlined by the American Society of Training and Development and the Department of Labor. (Attachment) The basic competencies of reading critically, writing and speaking clearly and computation are essential, but of equal importance are knowing how to learn and the social/emotional competencies of personal management, group effectiveness and influence. In his book, Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman cites a University of Kansas study that discovered that hope was a better predictor of first semester grades than SAT scores; that "given roughly the same range of intellectual abilities, emotional aptitudes make the critical difference" between

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[2]Angelo, Thomas A. and Cross, K. Patricia, Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers, 2nd edition. Jossey-Bass. 1993

high or low academic achievement.[3] Throughout Goleman's text there is evidence that development of self-awareness, the ability to deny impulse in the service of a goal, to persist in the face of defeat, and to soothe oneself when upset are prerequisites for learning. Goleman defines emotional literacy as the capacity to operate with an internal locus of control, an optimistic attitude, a sense of self-efficacy, an analytical, solution-oriented approach to problems, sensitivity to others' feelings and the flexibility to adapt to different situations.[4] Goleman's advice is followed in the Transition Class: lessons on emotional literacy are blended with the reading, writing and math skills review.

Writing assignments revolve around the themes of setting and reaching personal goals and making career choices. A library assignment requires students to research a successful person whom they admire who has overcome obstacles to reach a goal. Students develop increased self-awareness by examining the results of skills, study strategies, attitude, life-style habits, interest and learning style inventories. The twelve-week period of the Transition Class allows them **time** to discover what changes might need to be made in these areas **before** they enter college. By analyzing problem-solving scenarios and role-playing solutions, they anticipate problems and their solutions **before** they are contending with their college classes. Reading assignments and class discussions revolve around the themes of self-esteem and positive thinking based on materials like Stephen Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People and Les Brown's motivational videos.

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[3]Goleman, Daniel, Emotional Intelligence, Bantam Books. 1995., p.86

[4]Goleman, op cit., p.259

Math is done in problem-solving teams in which each student takes responsibility for the whole team's understanding. Students are reminded repeatedly that "The best way to understand something is to teach it to someone else." Because of the short duration of the Transition Class, students cannot remediate all their skill deficiencies; however, they become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses and, as a result, they more readily accept the prospect of enrolling in a developmental reading, writing or math class because they now understand their need for the class in the context of accomplishing their personal goals.

Students also learn about college expectations, processes, and procedures, including attendance patterns, study habits and teacher-student communication as well as how to access the resources at Parkland College. Knowing how to access the Peer Tutoring Lab, Writing Center, Learning Lab, Career and Counseling Center, Student Services office, Library, and computer labs **before** problems become overwhelming prepares them to be **proactive** in their first semester.

METHODOLOGY

Three principles govern the choice of methodologies used in the Transition Class: (1) students are responsible for their own learning, (2) students are expected to meet high expectations, and (3) community building strengthens the learning environment.

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(1) Students are responsible for their own learning

Often, students are not accustomed to being active learners. Many have an external locus of control. For example, a common false idea is that teachers give them grades rather than that grades are earned through their own effort. Many must unlearn helplessness and negativity and learn how to be positive and take an active role in making sure they do what needs to be done in order to master the material. Students develop a sense of responsibility by being in charge of a number of aspects of their learning. First, they are responsible for developing the weekly vocabulary list; each week the class chooses five words they want to understand and spell. Often, selection of the five words requires that the class come to consensus - a valuable social skill which blends into the vocabulary lesson.

Second, students evaluate their own work. Whenever possible, students correct their own work. They also track the assignments they have completed. Periodically and at midterm they complete self-evaluation forms to help them see how they are progressing in both their academic work and the development of their success strategies. Finally, they are responsible for assigning themselves a grade at the end of twelve weeks. As a result of engaging in these self-evaluations, students begin to see the connections between their life-style and personal habits and their academic performance. They begin to see the connection between effort and outcome. A Transition student once exclaimed, "How can I possibly give myself a grade? I haven't completed enough of the work!" It was immediately clear to her that she would have to assign a poor grade because of her inadequate work habits. At last, the correlation between her effort and the grade was understood.

Third, students have the opportunity to work in teams. Some of the team work is based on collaborative learning strategies. No matter how the team work is structured, they learn that their role is not only to learn themselves, but to make sure their team members are also learning. During these activities, tolerance and sensitivities develop and bonding occurs. Students become supportive of each other's learning and invested in each other's success. Relationships are built which continue outside of class and into the next semester. While in the Transition Class, students begin to develop the support system they will need if they are to persist in their college courses.

Fourth, students may also be responsible for individualized assignments outside of class. To accommodate the different reading and math levels in the class, supplemental books are given to students; they are expected to complete a certain amount of work each week.[5] Students are encouraged to initiate communication with the teacher if they need help with these assignments. Also, progress is reviewed in a midterm and final conference with the instructor.

Fifth, the instructor relies on frequent use of classroom assessment techniques to gather feedback from students about how they feel about their learning. As students experience the teacher adapting instruction to their expressed needs, they become aware that learning is a dynamic process between the student and him/herself and the teacher. Students become aware of their meta-cognitive activity and their meta-mood when they are directed to answer

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[5]Contemporary's Number Power series is used for math; New Readers Press Topics for the Restless and Selections from the Black are used for reading

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questions about how they are processing the material and how they feel about what is happening in the classroom. All the research that Goleman summarizes in Emotional Intelligence tells us that awareness of one's own inner feelings as they occur is the keystone of emotional intelligence. A capacity for self-reflection and self-observation is the fundamental emotional competence on which all others are based.[6] Goleman states, "channeling emotions toward a productive end is a master aptitude."[7] Students have **time** during the twelve weeks of the Transition Class to begin to recognize the part their emotions play in their learning process, practice making choices about how to respond to their own emotions and notice the consequences of their choices.

(2) Students are expected to meet high expectations

Students rise to high expectations. Mini-lectures and discussions focus on the expectations in today's workplace and the college environment. Students learn about successful people who have set and met goals in spite of obstacles and are expected to embrace these people as realistic models for their own success. Self-evaluation helps students monitor their progress and gauge the adequacy of their efforts. It is as great a benefit for students to discover that they are not ready to tackle college as it is for them to discover that they are ready. Much

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[6]Goleman, Daniel, Emotional Intelligence, Bantam Books. 1995., pg. 47

[7]Goleman, op cit., pg. 95

pain, frustration and ill-will can be avoided for individuals and the institution when this discovery occurs in the Transition Class **before** the student is enrolled in grade-bearing, college credit courses. Students gain an appreciation for the tremendous life change involved in committing themselves to a college education; with the magnitude of the task clearly understood, they can make informed choices about how to proceed.

3) Community Building Strengthens the Learning Environment

The integrated curriculum, class structure and active learning methodologies combine to foster community bonds among the class participants. Fellow class members become one another's support network. Not only do students maintain this support after they enter the college system but the process of bonding with their fellow Transition students is remembered as a model for how to make connections with the students they will meet in future classes. Activities which help them understand and value similarities and differences among each other also help them see that all students face common fears, problems and obstacles. They realize they are not alone and isolated. They develop the confidence to reach out to others and learn the importance of developing and maintaining a support network while going to college. A consistent point made on course evaluations is that students enjoy learning from each other.

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Transition Class model transforms the entry way to college from a treadmill into a staircase because it provides **time** for academic, social and emotional preparation for underprepared, non-traditional, first-generation college attenders **before** they fully matriculate in the college system. When the institution provides this kind of **first** option for college preparation it is responding to potential students in the most compassionate and competent way. The institution is operating openly, honestly and fairly by explicitly informing "at-risk" students about what is involved in going to college AND providing explicit instruction in how to be successful in college. The institution has taken the responsibility for assuring that first-generation college attenders are informed and aware **before** they invest their time, effort and money in their education.

The Transition Class is an effective way to "level the playing field" for first-generation college attenders who have no other way to find out about the expectations and demands of college attendance. Students benefit from **time** spent in a low-risk, supportive learning environment where they can learn the rules of the game **before** they must compete in the college classroom. They can rehearse and practice **before** they must perform under the pressure of grades. During the twelve weeks of the Transition Class they can learn how to anticipate and solve problems, begin to make child care and transportation arrangements well in advance of

beginning their college classes, explore interests and aptitudes, define career and educational goals and make realistic plans. Students leave the Transition Class having successfully surmounted the initial challenges involved in returning to formal schooling and an increased capacity to meet future challenges.

REFERENCES

Angelo Thomas A. and K. Patricia Cross, Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers. Second edition. Jossey-Bass Publishers. 1993.

Avishai, Bernard. "Companies Can't Make Up for Failing Schools." Manager's Journal. Wall Street Journal. July 29, 1996.

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HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Sandra Boileau, Dean of Continuing Education at Parkland College in Champaign, Illinois, had the vision to initiate focus group meetings involving all college staff serving at-risk students to explore more effective ways to prepare the at-risk student for success in vocational programs. Focus group discussions led to the development of the Transition concept. With unambiguous support from the college at large, Dean Boileau secured funds from the Illinois Community College Board and charged the Adult Basic Education Program with developing and piloting the Transition initiative.

Janet Scogins, Director of Adult Basic Education, selected adult education instructor, Gwen Koehler, for a special project: to design a program that would prepare at-risk, first- generation college attenders for success in vocational programs. Gwen Koehler designed the Transition Class and delivered instruction in FY94 and FY95. Ann Burke delivered instruction in FY96.

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FOLLOW-UP DATA

Targeted follow-up was done on the public aid clients who completed the pilot Transition Class before taking their vocational courses. Their performance in vocational courses was compared to the performance of clients who did not take the Transition Class. Both groups of clients were funded by the Public Assistance Vocational Program (PAV), a small fund within the ISBE grant that provided tuition, fees and books for clients taking vocational courses.

In **FY 93**, the clients did not take the Transition Class before enrolling in vocational courses.

Only **37%** of the clients funded through the PAV Program successfully completed their vocational courses in FY93:

average GPA: **2.5**

credit hours earned: **124**

In **FY 94**, all public aid clients were required to take the Transition Class before enrolling in vocational classes through the PAV Program.

100% of the clients who completed the Transition Class before enrolling in college vocational classes, funded through the PAV Program, successfully completed their vocational courses in FY94:

average GPA: **3.25**

credit hours earned: **355**

The Transition Class clearly contributed to the success rate of this group of at-risk, first generation college attenders.